

הלכות עבודת פסילים • פרק שלישי

Learned like the daf, the literal words in bold, flowing with the elucidation

CHAPTER PREVIEW

In this chapter, we begin to learn the practical halachos of how a person becomes liable for the terrible sin of avodah zarah, false worship. The Rambam teaches us the basic parameters of the prohibition, distinguishing between one who acts willingly, who is liable to kares or stoning, and one who acts inadvertently, who must bring a fixed sin offering. We will see how the Torah views the bizarre and repulsive ways the non-Jews devised to worship their idols, and how these specific practices define the legal liability of one who mimics them.

We will also learn a major principle in these halachos: the difference between the unique, bizarre service of a specific idol and the four universal services of the Beis HaMikdash. While a person is generally only liable for serving an idol in its own customary manner, there are four specific acts of worship—bowing, slaughtering, burning an offering, and pouring a libation—that make a person liable regardless of which idol he is serving, even if that is not its normal way of worship.

All introductions, summaries, and contextual notes are the editor's commentary and are not part of the original text.

הלכה א

Halacha 1 • The Punishment for Serving False Gods Intentionally and Inadvertently

כל העובד פסילים

Anyone who serves stars and constellations

ברצונו בידיו

willingly and intentionally

חייב כרת

is liable for kares (spiritual excision)

ואם היו שם עדים והתראה

and if there were there witnesses and a forewarning

נסקל.

he is stoned by the Beis Din.

ואם עבד בשגגה

And if he served them inadvertently

מביא קרבן חטאת קבועה:

he brings a sacrifice of a fixed sin-offering.

עבודות הרבה קבעו עובדי כוכבים

Many different types of services and rituals were established by the worshipers of stars

לכל צלם וצלם ולכל צורה וצורה

for each and every image, and for each and every form of idol,

ועבודת זה אינה כעבודת זה

and the service of this particular idol is not like the service of that other one.

כגון פֵּעוֹר שֶׁעֲבֹדְתּוֹ שֶׁפּוֹעֵר אָדָם עֲצָמוֹ לוֹ

For example, the idol of Peor, whose specific service is that a person uncovers himself to it in an indecent manner;

ומַרְקוּלִיס שֶׁעֲבֹדְתּוֹ שִׁזְרוֹק לוֹ אֲבָנִים אוֹ יִסְקֵל מִלִּפְנֵי אֲבָנִים

and Marculis, whose service is that he throws stones to it, or he clears stones from before it to add to the heap;

והרבה עבודות כגון אלו תקנו לשאר צלמים.

and many services like these they instituted for the rest of the images.

לפיכך הפוער עצמו למַרְקוּלִיס אוֹ שִׁזְרוֹק אֶבֶן לִפְעוֹר פֶּטוּר

Therefore, one who uncovers himself to Marculis, or who threw a stone to Peor, is exempt from the death penalty,

עד שיעבד אותו דרך עבודתו

until he serves it in the way of its specific service,

שנאמר "איכה יַעֲבֹדוּ הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה אֶת אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה כֵּן גַּם אֲנִי."

as it is said, "How did these nations serve their gods? And I will do so also, I."

ומפני זה הענין צריכין בית דין לידע דרכי העבודות.

And because of this matter, the Beis Din are required to know the ways of the services of the various idols,

שאין סוקלין עובד כוכבים עד שיידעו שזו היא דרך עבודתו:

for we do not stone a worshiper of stars until they know that this is indeed the way of its service.

ואזהרה של עבודות אלו וכיוצא בהן

And the warning in the Torah of performing these services and the like of them to an idol

הוא מה שכתוב "ולא תעבדם".

is what is written in the verse: "and do not serve them."

במה דברים אמורים

In what case are these words said, that one is only liable if he serves the idol in its normal manner?

בשאר עבודות חוץ ממשתחוה וזובח ומקטיר ומנסה.

Regarding other services, except for bowing, and slaughtering, and burning incense, and pouring libations.

אבל העובד באחת מעבודות אלו לאחד מכל מיני עבודת כוכבים חייב

But one who serves with one of these four services to one of all types of worship of stars is liable to the death penalty,

ואף על פי שאין דרך עבודתו בכה.

and even though that is not the way of its service to worship it in this manner.

כיצד.

How so?

הרי שנסה לפעור או שזבח למרקוליס חייב

Behold, one who poured libations to the idol Peor, or who slaughtered an animal to Markulis, is liable,

שנאמר "זבח לאלהים יחרם בלתי לה' לבדו".

as it is said: "He who slaughters to the gods shall be destroyed, except to Hashem alone."

זביחה בכלל עבודה היתה

Now, slaughtering was already included in the general category of service which is forbidden,

ולמה יצאת

and why did it go out from the general rule to be mentioned explicitly?

לומר לה מה זביחה מיוחדת שעובדין בה לשם

To say to you: Just as slaughtering is unique in that they serve with it to the Name of Hashem in the Beis HaMikdash,

וחייב הזובח לאל אחר סקילה עליה

and the one who slaughters to another god is liable to stoning for it,

בין היתה דרך עבודתו בזביחה או אינה בזביחה.

whether it was the way of its service with slaughtering, or whether it is not the way of its service with slaughtering;

אף כל עבודה שהיא מיוחדת לשם

so too, every service that is unique to the Name of Hashem,

אם עבד בזה לאל אחר

if he served with it to another god,

בין שהיתה דרך עבודתו בכך בין שאינה בכך חייב עליה.

whether that it was the way of its service in this manner, or whether that it is not in this manner, he is liable for it.

לכך נאמר "לא תשתחוה לאל אחר"

For this reason it is said: "do not bow down to another god,"

לחייב על השתחויה אפילו אין דרך עבודתו בכך.

to obligate for the bowing, even if it is not the way of its service in this manner.

והוא הדין למקטיר ומנסה.

And it is the same law for one who burns incense and pours libations.

וזורק ומנסה אחד הוא:

And sprinkling blood and pouring libations, they are considered one category of service.

הלכה ד

Halacha 4. Worshiping an Idol Through Disgraceful Acts and Accepting an Idol as a Deity

ספת לה צואה

If one smeared to it, to an idol, feces as an act of degradation,

או שנסה לה עביט של מי רגלים

or who poured a libation to it of a chamber pot of water of feet, meaning urine,

חייב.

he is liable to the death penalty, because this is equivalent to the service of Peor, which is worshipped through degradation.

שחט לה חגב

If one slaughtered to it a locust,

פטור

he is exempt from the death penalty,

אלא אם כן היתה עבודתה בכך.

unless indeed was its worship with this specific act.

וְכֵן אִם שָׁחַט לָהּ בְּהֵמָה מְחֹסֶרֶת אֵיבָר

And likewise if one slaughtered to it an animal lacking a limb,

פָּטוּר

he is **exempt**,

אֲלָא אִם כֵּן הָיְתָה דְּרָדָּה עֲבוֹדָתָהּ בְּכָהּ.

unless indeed was the way of its worship with this kind of worship.

עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים שְׁעוֹבֵדִין אוֹתָהּ בְּמִקְלָהּ.

Regarding an idol that they worship it with a staff:

שָׁכַר מִקְלָהּ בְּפָנֶיהָ

if one broke a staff before it,

חַיֵּב

he is **liable**, as breaking is akin to slaughtering,

וְנִאָּסְרָתָּהּ.

and it, the staff, is **forbidden** for any use as an offering to an idol.

זָרַק מִקְלָהּ בְּפָנֶיהָ

If one threw a staff before it,

חַיֵּב

he is **liable** for performing its service,

וְאֵינָהּ נִאָּסְרָתָּהּ.

but the staff is **not** forbidden.

שְׂאִין זְרִיקַת הַמִּקְלָהּ כְּעֵין זְרִיקַת הַדָּם

The reason is **because not throwing of the staff is like sprinkling of the blood** on the Mizbe'ach;

שֶׁהָרִי הַמִּקְלָהּ כְּמוֹ שֶׁהוּא

for behold the staff remains as it is when thrown,

וְהַדָּם מֵתִפְצֵר.

and the blood scatters when sprinkled.

הַמִּקְבֵּל עָלָיו אֶחָד מִכָּל מִינֵי עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים בְּאֵלֶיהָ

One who accepts upon himself one from all types of idols as a god,

חַיֵּב סָקִילָהּ.

is **liable** to stoning.

וְאִפְלוּ הִגְבִּיחַ לְבִנָּה

And even if he lifted a brick

וְאָמַר לָהּ אֵלִי אַתָּה

and said to it, "my god you are,"

וְכֵן כָּל כַּיּוֹצֵא בְּדִבּוּר זֶה

and likewise any similar to speech this,

חַיֵּב.

he is **liable**.

וְאִפְלוּ חָזַר בּוֹ בְּתוֹךְ כְּדֵי דִבּוּר

And even if he retracted • within the time of speech, which is the time it takes a disciple to greet his teacher,

וְאָמַר אֵין זֶה אֵלִי

and said, "is not this my god,"

אֵין חֲזָרְתּוֹ כְּלוּם

is **not his retraction anything** of substance to save him,

אֶלָּא נִסְקָל:

but instead **he is stoned**.

הַלָּכָה הַ

Halacha 5 • Serving an Idol in a Derisive Manner When That is Its Way of Worship

הָעוֹבֵד עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים בְּדֶרֶךְ כָּה

One who serves an idol according to its established way of worship,

וְאִפְלוּ עָשָׂה דֶּרֶךְ בְּזִיווֹן

and even if he did so in a way of disgrace and contempt,

חַיֵּב.

he is still **liable** for serving avodah zarah.

כיצד.

How so?

הפוער עצמו לפעור כְּדֵי לְבִזּוֹתוֹ

One who exposes himself to the idol of Peor in order to disgrace it,

או זרק אבן לְמַרְקוּלִיס כְּדֵי לְבִזּוֹתוֹ

or one who threw a stone to the idol of Marculis in order to disgrace it,

הואיל ועבודתו בכך

since its worship is performed with this very act,

חַיָּב.

he is liable for worshipping it.

ומביא קרבן על שגגתו:

And if he did so without realizing it was forbidden, he brings a sacrifice for his inadvertent transgression.

הלכה ו

Halacha 6 • Serving an Idol Out of Love or Fear and Acts of Deference to an Idol

העובד עבודת כוכבים מאהבה

One who serves worship of stars out of love for the idol itself,

כגון שֶׁשָּׁשָׁק בְּצוּרָה זוּ מִפְּנֵי מְלֹאכְתָּהּ שֶׁהִי יְתֵה נָאָה בְּיוֹתֵר.

for example, that he desired this image because of its craftsmanship, that was beautiful exceedingly,

או שֶׁעֲבָדָהּ מִירָאָתוֹ לֵאמֹר שֶׁמָּא תֵרַע לוֹ

or that he served it out of his fear of it, lest it do harm to him,

כְּמוֹ שֶׁהֵן מַדְמִינִים עוֹבְדֶיהָ שֶׁהִיא מֵיִטִּיבָהּ וּמְרַעָה.

just as its worshipers imagine, that it does good and does harm;

אם קבלה עליו באלוה חַיָּב סְקִילָה

if he accepted it upon himself as a god, he is liable to stoning,

ואם עבדה דרך עבודתה או באחת מארבע עבודות מאהבה או מִירָאָה פְּטוּר.

but if he served it only in the way of its service, or in one of four primary services, out of love or out of fear without accepting it as a god, he is exempt from the death penalty.

הַמִּגַּפָּה עֲבֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים וְהַמְנִשֵּׁק לָהּ

One who embraces worship of stars, and one who kisses it,

וְהַמְכַבֵּד וְהַמְרִיץ לְפָנֶיהָ

and one who sweeps, and one who sprinkles water before it to lay the dust,

וְהַמְרְחִיץ לָהּ וְהִסֵּף וְהַמְלַבִּישׁ וְהַמְנַעִיל

and one who washes it, and one who anoints it, and one who dresses it, and one who puts shoes on it,

וְכָל כִּיּוּצָא בְּדִבְרֵי כְבוֹד הָאֵלֹהִים

and all similar to these matters of honor,

עוֹבֵר בְּלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם,

transgresses a negative commandment, as it is said: "And do not serve them,"

וּדְבָרִים אֵלֶּה בְּכָלֵל עֲבֹדָה הֵן.

and these matters are in the category of service.

וְאֵף עַל פִּי כֵן אֵינוֹ לֹקָה עַל אַחַת מֵהֶן לְפִי שֶׁאֵינֶן בְּפִירוּשׁ.

And even though this is so, he does not receive lashes for one of them, because they are not explicitly written in the Torah.

וְאִם הָיְתָה דֶּרֶךְ עֲבֹדָתָהּ בְּאַחַד מִכָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַעֲשָׂהוּ לְעִבְדָּהּ חַיִּב:

And if the way of its service was with one of all these things, and he did it to serve it, he is liable to the full penalty.

הִלְכָּה ז

Halacha 7 • Prohibition of Bending Down Before an Idol Due to Appearances

יָשָׁב לוֹ קוֹץ בְּרַגְלֹו לְפָנֵי עֲבֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים

If a splinter sat, meaning it became stuck, for him in his foot while he was standing before an idol of worship of stars,

לֹא יִשָּׁח וְיִטְלֶנּוּ

he shall not bend down and remove it while standing there,

מִפְּנֵי שֶׁנֶּרְאָה כְּמִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהּ.

because to onlookers it appears like he is one bowing to it.

נִתְפָּזְרוּ לוֹ מַעוֹת בְּפָנֶיהָ

Similarly, if money scattered for him in front of it,

לא יִשָּׁח וְיִטֹּלֵם

he shall not bend down and take them from a standing position,

מִפְּנֵי שֶׁנִּרְאָה כְּמִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהּ

because it appears like he is one bowing to it;

אֲלָא יֵשֵׁב וְאַחֵר כִּךָּ יִטֹּל:

rather, he shall sit down completely, and after so, from his seated position, he shall take them, as this does not look like bowing.

הִלְכָּה ח

Halacha 8 - Prohibition of Drinking from Statues Spouting Water Before an Idol

פְּרָצוּפוֹת הַמְקֻלָּחוֹת מֵיָם

Regarding statues that spout water

בְּפָנֵי עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים

before an idol of worship of stars,

לֹא יִנִּיחַ פִּיו עַל פִּיהֶם וְיִשְׁתֶּה

a person should not place his mouth upon their mouth and drink,

מִפְּנֵי שֶׁנִּרְאָה כְּמִנְשֵׁק לְעֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים:

because it appears like he is kissing the idol of worship of stars.

הִלְכָּה ט

Halacha 9 - The Prohibition of Making an Idol for Oneself or for Others

הַעוֹשֶׂה עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים לְעַצְמוֹ

One who makes an idol of worship of stars for himself,

אֲףִי עַל פִּי שְׂלֵא עָשָׂאָה בְּיָדוֹ

even though he did not make it with his own hand but rather had someone else make it for him,

וְלֹא עֲבָדָהּ

and even if not yet he worshiped it,

לִזְקָה

he is lashed,

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר שְׁמוֹת כ ד "לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ פֶּסֶל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה".

as it is said in the Torah in Shemos 20:4, "Do not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness."

וְכִן הָעוֹשֶׂה עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים בְּיָדוֹ לְאַחֵרִים

And likewise, one who makes an object of worship of stars with his own hand for others,

אִפְלוּ עָשָׂאָה לְעוֹבֵד כּוֹכָבִים

even if he made it for a non-Jewish worshiper of stars,

לוֹקָה

he is lashed,

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וַיִּקְרָא ייט ד "וְאֵלֵּהִי מִסֵּכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ לָכֶם".

as it is said in Vayikra 19:4, "and gods of molten metal do not make for yourselves" which the Sages expound to mean you shall not make them for others to worship.

לְפִיכָה הָעוֹשֶׂה עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים בְּיָדוֹ לְעַצְמוֹ

Therefore, one who makes an object of worship of stars with his own hand for himself

לוֹקָה שְׁתַּיִם:

is lashed twice, once for making it for himself and once for physically making it.

הִלָּכָה י

Halacha 10 · The Prohibition of Making a Protruding Human Image for Decoration

אָסוּר לַעֲשׂוֹת צוּרוֹת לְנוֹי

It is forbidden to make images for decoration

וְאִף עַל פִּי שְׂאִינָה עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים

and even though that it is not for the purpose of worship of stars,

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר שְׁמוֹת כ כ "לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן אִתִּי"

as it is said in Shemos 20:20, "Do not make with Me,"

כְּלוּמַר צוּרוֹת שֶׁל כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב שְׂאִינָם אֶלָּא לְנוֹי

meaning to say, images of silver and gold which are not made except for decoration,

כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא יִטְעוּ בָהֶן הַטּוֹעִים וַיִּדְמּוּ שֶׁהֵם לַעֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים.

in order that not will err with them those who err and imagine that they are for worship of stars.

וְאִין אָסוּר לְצוּר לְנוֹי אֶלָּא צוּרַת הָאָדָם בְּלִבָּד.

And there is no prohibition to form for decoration except the form of the human alone.

לְפִיכָּהּ אֵין מְצִירִים לֹא בַעֲץ וְלֹא בְּסִיד וְלֹא בְּאֶבֶן צוּרַת הָאָדָם.

Therefore, we do not form, not in wood, and not in plaster, and not in stone, the form of the human.

וְהוּא שֶׁתִּהְיֶה הַצּוּרָה בּוֹלֵטָה

And this is when it is the image protruding,

כְּגוֹן הַצִּיּוּר וְהַכִּיּוּר שֶׁבִּטְרָקְלִין וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָהֶן

for example, the drawing and the carving that are in the hall and similar to them,

וְאִם צָר לוֹקָה.

and if one formed such a protruding image, he receives lashes.

אֲבָל אִם הִיְתָה הַצּוּרָה מְשֻׁקָּעָה

But if was the image sunken,

אוֹ צוּרָה שֶׁל סִמָּנִין

or an image of colors,

כְּגוֹן הַצּוּרוֹת שֶׁעַל גְּבֵי הַלוחֹת וְהַטֻּבִּלִּיּוֹת

for example, the images that are on top of the tablets and the boards,

אוֹ צוּרוֹת שֶׁרוֹקְמִין בְּאַרְיֵג

or images that they embroider in the weaving,

הֲרִי אֱלוֹ מִתְרוֹת:

behold, these are permitted.

הַלָּכָה יֵא

Halacha 11 · The Prohibition of Fashioning Images of Man and Heavenly Bodies

טַבַּעַת שֶׁיֵּשׁ עָלֶיהָ חוֹתֶם שֶׁהוּא צוּרַת אָדָם

Regarding a ring that has upon it a seal which is the form of a man:

אִם הִיְתָה הַצּוּרָה בּוֹלֵטָה אָסוּר לְהַנִּיחָהּ

if the form was protruding, it is forbidden to wear it, because it looks like he is wearing an idol,

וּמִתֵּר לְחַתֵּם בָּהּ.

but it is permitted to seal with it, since the seal it leaves in the wax or clay will be sunken.

וְאִם הִיְתָה הַצּוּרָה שׁוֹקָעָה מִתֵּר לְהַנִּיחָהּ

And if the form was sunken, it is permitted to wear it,

ואסור לחתם בה

and it is forbidden to seal with it,

מפני שהנחתם תעשה בו הצורה בולטת.

because their impression will make in it, meaning in the wax, the form protruding, and one is forbidden to make a protruding form of a human.

וכן אסור לצור דמות חמה ולכנה פוכבים מזלות ומלאכים

And likewise, it is forbidden to fashion the likeness of the sun and the moon, stars, constellations, and angels,

שנאמר שמות כ כ "לא תעשון אתי"

as it is said in the Torah in Shemos 20:20, "Do not make with Me,"

גמרא ראש השנה כד ב "לא תעשון כדמות שמימי המושמים לפני פמרום"

which the Gemara in Rosh Hashanah 24b expounds to mean: "Do not make like the likeness of My servants who serve before Me on high,"

ואפלו על הלוח.

and this prohibition applies even to drawing them flat on the tablet.

צורות הבהמות ושאר נפש חיה חוץ מן האדם

However, the forms of beasts and other living creatures, except for man,

וצורות האילנות ודשאים וכיוצא בהן

and the forms of trees and grasses and similar to them—

מותר לצור אותם

it is permitted to fashion them,

ואפלו הייתה הצורה בולטת:

and even if the form was protruding.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The chapter begins by establishing the punishments for serving false gods, whether done willingly or inadvertently. The Rambam explains that because gentiles established unique and often bizarre services for each idol—such as defecating before Pe'or or throwing stones at Marculis—a person is generally only liable if he worships the idol in its traditionally accepted manner, which requires the Beis Din to be knowledgeable in these pagan practices. However, the Torah singles out four specific services that are modeled after the avodah in the Beis HaMikdash—slaughtering, bowing, burning an offering, and

pouring a libation (including sprinkling blood)—ruling that performing any of these four acts to any idol brings immediate liability, even if it is not the customary mode of worship for that particular deity.

לְמַעֲשֶׂה WHAT TO TAKE HOME

My dear talmid, look at the incredible depth of what the Rambam is teaching us here. The Torah tells us that if a person worships an idol in its specific way, even if that way is completely bizarre, like throwing stones or doing something dirty and degrading, he is fully liable. Why? Because that is how that specific thing is served. But then the Torah adds that there are four special services, like bowing down or bringing an offering, that make a person liable no matter what, because these are the ultimate expressions of surrender and devotion that belong only to Hashem.

What is the deep avodah for us here? The yetzer hara is very clever. He doesn't come to a frum Yid and say, "Go worship an idol." Instead, he tries to get us to bow down and surrender our minds, our hearts, and our precious time to the modern "idols" of our generation, our phones, our careers, or the pursuit of honor. We might think, "I'm not really bound to these things, I'm just using them!" But the sugya teaches us that surrender is surrender. When you bow your head and give your entire focus to something other than Hashem, you are giving away a piece of your neshama's devotion to a foreign power.

We also see how careful we must be with our actions. The halachah says that if a coin falls in front of an idol, you cannot bend down to pick it up because it looks like you are bowing to it. A Yid must live with such a high level of yiras Shamayim that even the appearance of compromise is completely unacceptable. We must be pure, inside and out, ensuring that every single bend of our knee and every thought of our heart is directed "l'Hashem levado", to Hashem alone.

Today, notice where you direct your focus and devotion. When you feel the urge to immediately bow your head and surrender your attention to a distraction or a screen, pause for ten seconds, lift your eyes upward, and consciously declare that your mind and heart belong only to Hashem.